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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAHRAN 000014

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DEPT FOR NEA/ARP JOSHUA HARRIS AND JEREMY BERNDT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 1/23/2020
TAGS: PGOV, PHUM, PREL, INR, SA, YM, BA
SUBJECT: CALM PREVAILS IN THE EASTERN PROVINCE AS SHIA COMMEMORATE
ASHURA

REF: A. A. 09 RIYADH 173
B. B. 09 DHAHRAN 265
C. C. 09 DHAHRAN 295
D. D. 09 DHAHRAN 008

CLASSIFIED BY: Joseph Kenny, Dhahran Consul General, Department
of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

1. (S/NF) An atmosphere of calm prevailed during the Islamic New Year as Shia of the Eastern Province celebrated Ashura. Moderate leaders such as Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar drew large audiences to their lectures during the run-up to Ashura, with a particularly strong showing by youth. Contacts note that the inflammatory Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, whose influence has reportedly dwindled in recent months, is no longer in hiding and is now under quasi house arrest. Though frustrations persist and discrimination remains, many Shia in the EP describe the atmosphere as "calm" and "tolerable." End Summary.

Ashura Marked by Peaceful Commemoration

2. (C) On December 27, PolOff traveled to the predominantly Shia city of Qatif and the outlying Shia villages of Al-Awjam and Al-Gudaih to observe various Ashura processions. (Note: Ashura is a Shia day of mourning that commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein Ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 C.E. During Ashura, Shia religious leaders in the Eastern Province deliver various sermons to local audiences, mostly addressing societal issues, though political topics often receive attention, as well. End Note.) XXXXXXXXXXXX (protect), a well-connected Shia and trusted Post contact with deep roots in Qatif, facilitated the visit and interpreted when necessary. PolOff witnessed a reenactment of the Battle of Karbala in the village of al-Gudaih--prohibited last year (ref A)--as well as four different processions where participants, from young children to the elderly, conducted ritualistic self-flagellation. (Note: Though potentially bloody, none of the processions involved actual self-flagellation causing physical harm. The ritual is meant to demonstrate solidarity with the suffering of Hussein and his family. End Note.) The Ashura processions were marked by a busy atmosphere with numerous spectators, heavy vehicular traffic, and relative calm.

Though a small police presence was visible, mostly for traffic control purposes, it did not interfere in the processions.

Prominent Scholar A Paragon of Moderation

3. (C) On December 23, the sixth day of the Islamic New Year, PolOff attended an evening lecture delivered by Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar in his husseiniyya (Shia community center) in Qatif. PolOff was joined by XXXXXXXXXXXX(protect) and XXXXXXXXXXXX (protect), Vice-President of the XXXXXXXXXXXX and lead engineer for Saudi XXXXXXXXXXXX (ref b). In attendance were approximately five hundred males, many of them in their mid 20's and 30's. (Note: Contacts informed PolOff that females were situated in an adjacent hall, watching via closed circuit monitor. PolOff is not aware how many females attended the lecture. End Note.) Al-Saffar's lecture addressed political violence across the world and the devastating toll warfare takes on mankind. Additionally, he spoke about negative influences from television, music, the internet, and video games and their effect on societal violence.

He concluded his lecture with a powerful discourse on the martyrdom of Hussein Ibn Ali, bringing many in the crowd to tears.

4. (C) The hour-long husseiniyya lectures are commonplace in the Shia community, but more so during Ashura when they take place

on a daily basis, with several lectures offered throughout the evening by different leaders in the community. (Comment: Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar is a Saudi Shia reformist leader who has made significant progress in communicating with Salafi leaders and other senior officials in Saudi Arabia. He has come out strongly in favor of the SAG in recent months (ref C) and preached incessantly on the need for greater minority rights from the SAG. He advocates peaceful coexistence with the Sunni majority while cautiously demanding greater tolerance for all religious practices, as well as increased access to government positions for minorities. End Comment.)

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5. (C) On January 6, Shia contacts sent PolOff excerpts of various lectures delivered during the Ashura period. Sheikh al-Saffar, among others, spoke on topics such as the peculiarities of Islamic sects, the need for Muslim unity, and sectarian discrimination. He emphasized the need to overcome the prevailing state of pessimism in reaching Sunni-Shia unity. Al-Saffar also praised King Abdullah's reform initiatives, noting that issues such as human rights and poverty, previously absent from the national dialogue, are more prominent under the King's leadership. Al-Saffar condemned extremists in all parties, stating that, "among Shias, as well, there are some religiously extreme individuals; therefore, we have to hold our responsibility as we call on others to their responsibilities." Other prominent members of the Shia community, such as Sayyed Muneer al-Khabbaz, Sheikh Faisal Alawami, and Sheikh Fawzy al-Saif also delivered lectures. (Note: PolOff did not attend these lectures but received summarized, translated notes of their respective discourses. None demonstrated inflammatory themes or language. End Note.)

A Shia Radical Losing Ground

6. (S/NF) In a recent meeting with PolOff on December 22, XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXX, without prodding from PolOff, disclosed that religious scholar Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr has returned from hiding in an undisclosed location to his home in the village of al-Awwamiya, near Qatif. Earlier this year, after the Medina incident and its aftermath (ref D), al-Nimr called on Shia to secede from the Kingdom. (Comment: Al-Nimr had been a minority voice in the Shia community before 2009. As a result of ongoing state-backed violence and continued intolerance against the Shia community, al-Nimr's hard line approach found increasing support in 2009 as he was able to channel the frustration and discontent of the Shia community. In al-Awwamiya, a small village north of Qatif and one with a

history of radicalism, he denounced the decision to engage the state in dialogue and made clear his belief that the Shia will have to fight in order to achieve a modicum of equality. He subsequently went into hiding to avoid a state manhunt. End Comment.) XXXXXXXXXXXXX, who also hails from al-Awwamiya and referred to al-Nimr as his "neighbor," said that al-Nimr is under quasi house arrest. He added that the SAG chose not to pursue him further out of concern they would elevate his status.

Lacking political acumen, al-Nimr spoke out too strongly against the SAG, said XXXXXXXXXXXXX, thereby losing credibility and his following.

Comment

7. (C) Though discrimination by the SAG against the Shia community of the Eastern Province persists, the near-boiling tensions that followed the Medina incident and mosque closures throughout 2009 appear to have abated, for the time being (ref D). This year's Ashura commemoration was marked by calm, with no reported incidents of harassment by the Saudi authorities or Salafis. Even the controversial reenactment of the Battle of Karbala in al-Gudaih--banned last year (ref A)--was permitted with no visible signs of Saudi authorities except for the traffic police.

8. (S) Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar's consistent tone of moderation is a boon to stability in the Shia community of the EP, especially as Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr's influence, though limited, appears to have waned. His inclusive message, advocating greater rights for minorities as a whole, is an important distinction from past demands for Shia rights specifically. Al-Saffar is thereby widening the appeal of his message and, potentially, his following. End Comment.

CG: JKENNY

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